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The Life Course Approach – it's about Time!

Matthias Wingens and Herwig Reiter

Abstract

Over the last few decades the life course approach has considerably enriched our understanding of the social world and stimulated important methodological innovations. Yet, its theoretical contribution for advancing social theory in general has been marginal. The article suggests first steps towards life course theorising by considering the essentially temporal character of this approach. The article first defines what constitutes the life course approach and then discusses its dimensions and, in a time-sociological perspective its guiding principles which are often mistaken for the theoretical essence of life course research. We then elaborate on the temporal aspects of the analytical key concepts of the life course approach: transition, trajectory, and turning point. In order to indicate the direct link to the sociology of time we conclude with a discussion of some temporal aspects of the structure of trajectories.

Der Lebenslaufansatz – it's about time!

Zusammenfassung

Obwohl der Lebenslaufansatz unser Verständnis von Gesellschaft über die letzten Jahrzehnte erheblich bereichert und zu wichtigen methodologischen Innovationen geführt hat, war sein Beitrag zur allgemeinen Theoriebildung eher gering. Indem er den essentiell zeitlichen Charakter des Lebenslaufansatzes in den Vordergrund rückt, versteht sich dieser Artikel als ein erster Schritt in Richtung einer theoretischen Elaboration des Lebenslaufansatzes. Zunächst beschreiben wir die wesentlichen Aspekte und Dimensionen des Lebenslaufansatzes und diskutieren die zeitsoziologischen Implikationen seiner Leitprinzipien, die oft als theoretische Kernaussagen missverstanden werden. Im Anschluss daran erörtern wir zeitliche Aspekte der analytischen Schlüsselkonzepte des Lebenslaufansatzes (Transition, Trajektorie und Wendepunkt). Um den unmittelbaren Zusammenhang zur Zeitsoziologie zu unterstreichen, schließt der Artikel mit einer Diskussion ausgewählter zeitlicher Aspekte der Struktur von Trajektorien.

1. Introduction

Since Elder's (1974) seminal study the sociological life course approach has significantly increased our social scientific knowledge. It has produced a substantive field of social inquiry with the life course as its constitutive subject-matter. Studies delineate the emergence of the modern life course and explain life course patterns and socio-economic diversity as well as historical and cross-national variations of life courses. In addition, life course concepts have successfully been applied by empirical researchers in almost all fields of social inquiry. Not surprisingly, this "integration of life course principles with the total range of theoretical and substantive themes" (George 2003, 673) constitutes the bulk of research relating to the life course approach. Yet, according to George, its conceptual incorporation makes the life course approach "increasingly less distinctive" (*ibid.*, 678). Its successful conceptual dissemination, however, should not necessarily involve a blurring of the life course approach. Rather, its potential indistinctiveness results from the lack of a sufficiently elaborate life course theory.

Considering the impressive career of the life course approach over the last thirty-five years, this theory deficit is difficult to understand. It is all the more problematic as this approach has consistently claimed to constitute a promising starting point for tackling the social sciences' crucial micro-macro problem by analysing the dynamic interrelation of structure and agency. Yet, while the life course perspective has stimulated important methodological innovations (e.g. event-history analysis, sequence analysis) its potential theoretical innovations for advancing social theory are still missing. Life course research has contented itself with conducting empirical studies, theoretically accompanied by a prayer-wheel like reeling off of Elder's life course principles. "There is" – as Mayer (2006, 2365) rightly points out – "still a long way to go in developing life course theory."¹

It's about time to hit the road. We do not attempt to provide a fully-fledged life course theory, but rather take some small steps towards life course theorising commencing from the fact that "time matters" (Abbott 2001). Almost four decades of life course research have convincingly demonstrated the indispensability of theoretically (and methodically) taking "time" into account. Thus, we focus on the time-sociological implications of the life course approach, especially its crucial analytical concepts, and try to take a first step towards a coherent conceptual apparatus for life course research as a basis for elaborating life course theory further.

First, we define in general terms what constitutes the life course approach (2.). Its three crucial constituents of structure, agency, and time are then described in some detail (3.). Subsequently, we present Elder's life course principles and discuss some of their time-sociological implications, partly extending their original meaning (4.). However, as these cannot fully instruct life course theory, we elaborate on the temporal aspects of the analytical key concepts of the life course approach: transition, trajectory, and turning point (5.). A discussion of the temporal structure of trajectories as a starting point for theorising "time" in the life course concludes our article (6.).

1 The widespread use of this term is misleading labelling. Rather, its proponents refer to some imaginative and loosely coupled set of presuppositions, concepts, and rationales for guiding empirical studies: "a theoretical orientation, ... and we use the term 'theory' with this particular meaning" (Elder/Johnson/Crosnoe 2003, 4). Yet, why use it at all when something else is meant?

2. Defining the sociological life course approach

There is a tendency to conceive of the life course approach simply as a longitudinal micro-analytical perspective. This resort to a definition in terms of a certain type, or quality, of data and methodology only underlines the lack of life course theory. Nonetheless, the life course approach is more than just a methodological programme. There is a crucial difference between merely adopting a longitudinal micro-analytical research design and the life course approach: the latter essentially implies substantial concepts (Mayer 2000). With this qualification in mind, we suggest a theoretically substantial definition: the life course is a – historically variable – socio-culturally and politically constructed institution that produces societal continuity and social integration through structurally embedded sequences of age-related status configurations which refer to individuals' societal participations and orient (but do not determine) biographical action. Life courses establish opportunity structures for self-realisation as well as patterns of rules ordering the temporal dimensions of social life.

This conceptualisation implies that the life course is neither a purely empirical phenomenon nor an accidental amassment of events, experiences, contexts, and actions; nor is it an epigenetic unfolding of some inherent “natural” property of the individual.² Neither is it a merely idiosyncratic process-related phenomenon. While it is true that each individual's life is unique – which is evident taking into account the biographical meanings of life events and the aspect of personal identity – the life course approach is interested in “systematic regularities in events of unique meaning” (Hagestad 1991, 31). Such life course patterns emerge from the complex interrelations of societal structuring forces and biographical actions in the course of time. Relating the dynamics of individual biographies to the dynamics of social structures and institutions – and analysing this dynamic relationship – constitutes the crucial idea of the sociological life course approach. Changing societal structures and conditions affect, often via institutional regulations, individual lives and biographical plans. In turn, changing biographies affect the economic, political, social, and cultural situation and the institutional regime of a society. Thus, the life course approach essentially analyses the interplay of structure and agency over time. The concepts of structure, agency, and time are therefore its crucial constituents. While conventional social theory discourse focuses on the interrelation of structure and agency only, it is the systematic consideration of “time” – to be precise: the conceptual integration of the time-dimension into the structure-agency interplay – which makes the particular theoretical quality of the sociological life course approach: it's about time!

This conceptualisation has both theoretical and methodological consequences. Methodologically, it calls for longitudinal individual-level data and microanalyses embedded in multi-level models of social processes. This does not favour either quantitative or qualitative methods (Giele/Elder 1998). Rather, by focusing on the interplay of structure and agency over time, the life course perspective renders this widespread methodological polarisation inappropriate. Instead, methodologies are needed

² As developmental psychologists sometimes still tend to assume, regarding social contexts not as constitutive of a person or biography but taking them into account only as (important) mediating variables. While there has been a lot of talk about integrating the sociological life course and psychological lifespan perspective so far there is only little progress but, rather, reason for taking a sceptical view (Diewald/Mayer 2009; Mayer 2003; Settersten 2009).

that grasp the – historically contingent – objective (external) shape and formation of life courses as well as their subjective (internal) biographical meaning and dynamics. While the sociological life course perspective has stimulated important methodological innovations (e.g. Mayer 2000), its potential theoretical innovations remain rather limited. We leave it here with this brief methodological comment and pick up again the theoretical perspective to discuss the conceptual constituents of the life course approach.

3. Structure, agency, and time in the life course approach

Structure

Over the last three centuries, demographic and socio-cultural change led to an “institutionalisation of the life course” (Kohli 2007) with its basic tripartite chronological order of education, work, and retirement. The institutionalisation of the life course is the correlate of modernity’s individualisation process: as people got relieved from traditional bonds the pre-modern categorical mode of societal integration was complemented by a temporal mode relating to individuals as biographical actors and their conceptions of life and aging. Thus, modern societies have established temporal structures of relatively high stability for structuring life courses. All variants of the institutionalisation thesis – whether arguing that modern life course regimes result from the social organisation of work (Kohli 1986) are brought about by the welfare state (Mayer/Müller 1986), or are cultural constructs (Fry 2002; Meyer 1986)³ – agree on modern society’s life course scheduling enacted through time-related, or age-related, social structures and institutional regimes.

Any kind of life course structuring is inherently temporal. On the macro-level it is exerted by the economic, political, and cultural systems of societies (i.e. legal regulations, welfare-state regimes, markets, ethnicity and language, religion, values and norms, collective historical identity). On the meso-level structuring results from the interwoven texture of societal institutions and organisations: e.g. from the architecture of the educational and employment system, welfare entitlements, or age norms. All these structural contexts constitute clocking devices for biographies. They represent distinct logics of linking an individual’s past life history with his present life and future biographical plans and, at the same time, relate them to society and its dynamics. The crucial importance of structures for the life course approach is reflected in quite a number of comparative studies delineating cross-national variations in life course patterns and analysing the impacts of societies’ historically grown, i.e. nation-specific, institutional regimes of life courses (Blossfeld 2009; Mayer 2005).⁴

Age-related societal structures and institutional regimes pre-shape and schedule social pathways for individuals’ lives (Mayer 2004). They create expectable life

3 It is also irrelevant here whether the tripartite life course model does justice to female life courses (Krüger 2003; Moen 1985), or has become dysfunctional because the societies of today require and their individuals wish for an age-integrated, as opposed to an age-differentiated, life course model (Riley/Kahn/Foner 1994).

4 Especially European life course research strongly focuses on the connection between nationally varying life course regimes and societies’ political economies and welfare regimes. For a general account of the differences between European and North American life course research see Hagestad 1991; Heinz/Krüger 2001; Marshall/Mueller 2003.

course patterns of timing of events and the sequencing of roles: so-called “normal biographies” (Anderson 1985; Kohli 1986).⁵ Yet, the notion of standard(ized) life courses has been questioned from the very outset. It is argued that the “normal biography” is a product of, and constricted to, the Fordist societal conditions prevailing until the mid-1970s (Myles 1992), while economic and macro-social changes since then have made life courses less orderly and predictable. However, empirical evidence for the argument of a de-standardisation of life courses (Buchmann 1989; Held 1986; Macmillan 2005) is not conclusive and depends very much on the social sphere and national context under investigation.⁶ Furthermore, areas where some de-standardisation is actually observable may only undergo a historical process of re-standardisation leading to novel life course patterns. Nevertheless, there are still – at least to a certain degree – standardised sequences of events, status passages, and social roles: i.e. life course patterns induced by society’s structures and institutions of social timing.

Agency

As structures and institutions do not impact deterministically on life courses, individual agency is a second conceptual constituent of the life course approach. Modernity’s rationalisation process, growing individualisation, accelerated social change, and the uncertainties of modern risk society (Beck 1992; Rosa 2005) made status passages in the life course increasingly conditional, thus imposing agentic behaviour upon the individual (Meyer/Jepperson 2000). Individuals pursue their own goals and biographical plans, evaluating structural opportunities and institutional constraints. They do not merely follow institutionally pre-scheduled pathways but construct their biographies as self-monitoring actors. The “curiously abstract concept” (Hitlin/Elder 2007) of agency often just refers to the anthropological idea of an intrinsic human capability “to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events” (Giddens 1984, 14). Another common understanding of agency denotes personality resources or characteristics brought to bear when taking action, thus making it amenable to empirical measurement by operationalising it in psychological terms as planful competence, self efficacy, locus of control, or coping.

A theoretically elaborate sociological notion of agency refers to the fundamentally temporal nature of human experience: to live simultaneously in the present, past, and future. Agency is defined as the “temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments ... which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations” (Emirbayer/Mische 1998, 970). There are, thus, according to Emirbayer and Mische, three constitutive dimensions of agency: practical evaluation corresponding to choosing appropriate

5 Concerning these predictable life course patterns European scholars tend to take a structural view referring to the modern welfare state and its institutions, regulations, and policies as structuring forces (Leisering 2003; Mayer 2001; Mayer/Schöpflin 1989) while North American scholars rather take a cultural view focusing on shared notions, or mental maps, of life scripts and timetables (Hagestad/Neugarten 1985; Settersten 2003).

6 While there is “considerable evidence supporting the de-standardisation thesis in the area of private lives (...) we find little support for the de-standardisation thesis in the spheres of education, training and work” (Brückner/Mayer 2005, 48 f.).

action in the present; iteration corresponding to reactivating past patterns of action; and projectivity corresponding to the imagination of future action. These constitutive dimensions are only analytically distinguishable within the “chordal triad” (ibid.) of agency: i.e. all three combined, but to varying degrees, constitute individual action and are inherent in any empirical instance of action. Through agency individuals become “biographical actors” (Heinz 1996, 56). As opposed to an actor model of mere norm following or subjective utility maximisation, the model of the biographical actor takes into account the time-related sociological conception of agency as it “integrates a person’s life history and life perspective, her perceived options and situational circumstances” (ibid.). It emphasises the legacy of biographical experiences (past) as well as life plans (future) as constitutive elements in actors’ situational evaluative action taking (present).

Time

The life course approach analyses the interplay of structure and agency over time. Thus, it must account not only for interdependencies of different life domains but also for interdependencies of different temporal dynamics and multi-temporal relationships on three levels: for interactions of the micro-dynamics of individual biographical time, the meso-dynamics of institutional (or social) time, and the macro-dynamics of historical time. Historical time refers to the standard type of gradual evolutionary social change of societal structures and conditions and its effects on individuals’ lives.⁷ Institutional time relates to social age schedules or age norms and their life course impacts. Such “social clocks” do not tick constantly in an undifferentiated velocity of flow. Rather, they schedule more and less eventful life phases. They also make life course events on-time or off-time, with the respective timing implying socially (dis-)advantageous consequences. Due to on-going political readjustments of institutional regimes and regulations and to organisational innovation, the particular dynamics of this time dimension occur, in general, at a higher rate and greater pace. Finally, the micro-level of biographical time refers not only to individual ageing but also points to the fact that previous life history experiences and future life plans profoundly impact on pending biographical decisions.

Modern society’s individuals face the challenge of reconciling these three time horizons and their respective dynamics. A prominent example of the problem of attuning these different time horizons to one another comes from transformation research. Asynchronicity in post-communism occurs as ingrained habits and mental attitudes outlast rapid and radical institutional changes – producing a problem of fit between institutions and individuals (e.g. Reiter 2012). Synchronisation is especially complex here as individuals are often confronted with a twofold challenge: on the one hand, they have to account for the temporal interdependencies of different life domains; on the other hand, they are at the same time subject to several institutional regimes and organisational regulations among and within different societal fields which are themselves not necessarily temporally coordinated.

7 Yet, due to far-reaching events – like revolutions or war – the macro-dynamics of historical time may sometimes be exceedingly vigorous.

4. Principles of life course research and their time-sociological implications

Empirical life course research has produced some principles which serve as conceptual guideposts for empirical studies: historical time and place, situational imperatives and agency, linked lives, life stage, and accentuation (Shanahan/Macmillan 2008, 55). Originally, Elder constructed these principles out of a variety of his empirical findings in order to form generalisations for life course research. They are often reiterated and (mis-)taken for life course theory. In the following, we present these principles⁸ and reflect some time-sociological implications which can be read into them.

Time and place

According to the principle of time and place, the institution of the life course is contingent upon the context. It is shaped by historically particular economic, socio-cultural, and political circumstances. As mentioned above, comparative life course research clearly demonstrates that macro developments impact on life chances and the shape of the life course. These differences translate into differences in institutions and behaviour on the meso- and micro level. This first life course principle addresses the question: what kind of life – i.e. what series of experiences and in which order – is probable for a certain cohort or social group in a certain geographical, cultural and political area? Time and place of birth, processes of growing up and of aging determine the availability of opportunities and the possibility to realise certain biographical patterns. Historical times and places relate to specific sets of norms and values, and carry with them specific standards of social mobility and achievement that suggest the development and realisation of some desires while blending out others. Even within countries, regions and rural and urban areas move with different speeds and create large spheres of asynchronicity and variation (Eder 2004), which life courses try to absorb.

Situational imperatives and agency

The principle of situational imperatives refers to the changeable demands and requirements of situations and living conditions. According to the principle of agency, people respond to these settings purposefully in order to maintain a sense of control over their biography and its context. Social change affects the “contents” of time and place and the roles people have in them. Change requires adaptation in all three dimensions of agency distinguished by Emirbayer/Mische (1998) and, thus, on all three levels of time. In the iterational dimension individuals need to act in an attitude of selective reproduction (or not) of past patterns of thought and action. In the projective dimension of imagining possible futures they may arrive (or not) at creative and innovative ways of modifying and actualising received patterns of thought and action. And in the dimension of practical evaluation individuals are required to react to present situational challenges on the basis of possible alternatives of action. In such a process

8 Elder and others sometimes speak of “paradigmatic principles” or of “linking mechanisms,” using both terms synonymously – and sometimes they claim a sharp distinction according to which the former term refers to a “broadly applicable idea” and the latter one to a “process that links transitions to behaviour” (Elder 1991; Elder/Johnson/Crosnoe 2003; Elder/Shanahan 1998; Shanahan/Macmillan 2008, 55).

of identifying the appropriateness of situational imperatives individuals respond to situational requirements as purposive agents.

Linked lives

The principle of linked lives reflects the essentially social character of human life. Individuals live interdependently, embedded in networks of social relations, and the effects of societal change on individuals depend on these relationships. Originally, this principle is narrowly defined and related only to other people. In terms of time sociology, it conceives of individual biographies and the timing of related decisions and events as interconnected with those of others. For instance, partners attune their biographical planning, even their everyday time. In a broader understanding this principle can be extended to institutions. People are not only tied to others, but are also linked to and dependent on social institutions and 'ideas' like the family, the labour market or the state. In a life course framework we need to include these social clocking devices in our understanding of society as essentially characterised by relational interdependencies (Elias 1978; Emirbayer 1997). Importantly, both individuals and institutions (qua "others") represent time. The temporal links between the lives of individuals and that of institutions are manifold and can be accommodated within a life course framework.

Life-stage

The life-stage principle suggests that the effects of social change and the meaning and consequences of events for individual lives vary across the life course and depend on the life stage in which they occur. Events can also link individual time lines with historical and institutional ones, and the age dependence of their ramifications connects individuals in a particular way with their society. Following Mannheim (1952/1928/29) the shared experience of events, in the sense of significant (extended) moments in history, can socialise and consolidate peers into generations. A whole tradition of generational research can be characterised by essentially reiterating variations of this principle of the life stage (Edmunds/Turner 2002).

Accentuation

Finally, the principle of accentuation means that the social and psychological resources and dispositions individuals have acquired over their life history, for instance their trained behavioural patterns and attitudes, grow stronger in times of social and personal change. In the confrontation with the unknown and in situations of "knowledge crisis" (Schütz 1944), the typical reaction consists in the application, adjustment, and updating of available dispositions in terms of knowledge, experience and habits. Following Emirbayer/Mische (1998), this principle also relates to the agency dimension of iteration where the routine of reproducing past patterns of thought and action helps to sustain stability and continuity. Their accentuation in times of crisis appears to be a logical consequence for maintaining identity. In terms of research, the principle of accentuation points to the necessity of dedicating considerable attention to the analysis of the past and history of behaviour patterns of individuals.

These life course principles may serve as fruitful conceptual starting points for empirical analyses of the contingent relations between social structures, institutional regulations, and biographies. As we indicated, they also have direct time-sociological implications. However, they do not instruct a consistent life course theory.⁹ Not only do they leave room for incorporating various social science theories – they rather necessitate reference to those theories in order to make themselves “work”.¹⁰

5. Analytic life course concepts and their time-sociological implications

For this systematic reason, a genuine life course theory cannot be developed by drawing on Elder's principles. It seems more promising to elaborate on the two basic analytical concepts in life course research: “transition” and “trajectory” and their time-sociological implications. Our first steps of theorizing the life course on the basis of these two concepts take us to a third one – i.e. that of the turning point.

Transition

Transitions are clearly defined as “changes in state that are more or less abrupt” (Elder 1985, 31 f.), e.g. from “employed” to “unemployed.”¹¹ Although they are often the final result of a preceding development (e.g. divorces usually result from longer-term disintegration processes), transitions are methodically treated as point-like events. Life course research tends to focus on singular particular transitions for three reasons: the transition concept can be easily operationalized; it can be directly applied by the most important method of event history analysis; for many research questions appropriate longitudinal data are lacking. Thus, the vast majority of life course research is actually transition research. To date, holistic analyses of whole life courses exist only in qualitative biographical research (though quantitatively some progress has been achieved by optimal matching and sequence analysis).

Some transitions, whether based on a person's own choice or externally imposed, are highly consequential in the sense of initiating cumulative processes in life courses and, eventually, path-dependences (DiPrete/Eirich 2006; O'Rand 2009). Such transitions usually occur at junctures between different institutional or life domains (e.g. from education to work) or within these domains (e.g. opting for a particular type of secondary schooling after primary education). The fact, that a single transition may

9 And thus they cannot serve as a theoretically coherent instruction manual for conducting life course studies. In empirical research usually not all principles are applied; rather, it depends on the research question and subject under study which of these conceptual guideposts are taken into account and whether there is a dominant principle guiding a study.

10 E.g., to put the principle of agency to work in empirical research, rational choice theory or any other theory of action may be applied. Or consider the principle of linked lives which needs to be translated into empirical research by applying, e.g., network theories or theories of social capital.

11 A methodical precondition for analysing transitions is that the researcher, when operationalizing the research question, defines a valid state space determining which social status – and thus: changes in state – may occur at all (e.g.: single, married, divorced, widowed, remarried, etc.). While the transition concept refers to an individual process of state change the related term “status passage” refers to transitions as well as their societal configurations: “On the micro level status passages are constructed by biographical actors (...). On the macro level status passages refer to institutional resources and guidelines for life course transitions” (Heinz 1996, 58 f.). Yet, rather than blurring individual action and societal structures in one term, the micro and macro level should analytically be distinguished.

yield a persistent effect on the subsequent life course is due to structurally programmed probabilities for particular continuations and course patterns. Such more (or less) probable life course continuations point to the second analytical key concept of trajectory.

Trajectory

A trajectory relates to a longer phase within the life course.¹² Formally, it is “marked by a sequence of life events and transitions” (Elder 1985, 31). This definition suggests that transitions constitute trajectories. Yet, some conceptual problem arises as transitions are said to be “always embedded in trajectories that give them distinctive form and meaning” (ibid.). Logically, this statement grants trajectories conceptual priority over transitions¹³ while the first one rather points to a reverse order. There is, thus, some lack of clarity concerning the relation between the two concepts. Furthermore, having a distinctive form and meaning itself is an essential precondition for a trajectory to give transitions a distinctive form and meaning. We lack, however, knowledge on what the distinctive forms and meanings of different trajectories look like and how they are constituted.

One could suppose a formative trigger-event that imprints its meaning on the initiated process. Nevertheless, this implies a highly problematic deterministic notion of trajectories.¹⁴ Rather, life course research usually relates trajectories to particular institutions or life domains interlocking life events and transitions. In this manner trajectories are structurally established as, e.g., school, work, retirement, health, or family trajectory. It is this constitutive association with a particular institution or life domain, in other words its structural foundation that makes a trajectory strongly inertial. Thus, trajectories may be characterised theoretically as “life episodes with a capacity for self-regeneration and self-perpetuation. Such episodes are widely programmed into our social institutions (...) What makes the trajectories trajectories is their inertial quality (...) of enduring large amounts of minor variation without any appreciable change in overall direction” (Abbott 1997, 92 f.).

Given this inertial character of trajectories, a crucial problem for life course research is to determine when (and why) a substantive change in this overall direction occurs, i.e. when a trajectory comes to an end. This problem may be evaded only by supposing a priori that there is just one trajectory relating to a particular institution or life domain. Yet, methodologically this may be counterproductive: it is inappropriate, e.g., to refer to only one family trajectory if many people in the sample get divorced

12 Generally, “trajectory” is a ballistic term denoting the flight path of a missile which has a definite direction (graphically represented not as a straight line but a curve). Yet, while ballistics conceives of trajectories deterministically there is no deterministic notion whatsoever in the trajectory concept of the life course approach.

13 Cf. also Mayer (2003, 467) who views the life course as “a self-referential process” showing “endogenous causation”, thus supposing conceptual priority of trajectories over transitions.

14 This may also apply to generation and cohort theories which assume that particular historical situations and societal circumstances cause a lasting imprint on individuals, thus producing distinguishable generations in the first place (cf. Mannheim 1952/1928/29; Ryder 1965) – an overstressing of the supposition of a formative period ignores individuals’ capacity for learning.

but afterwards found a new family.¹⁵ Theoretically, such a supposition would require a definite answer to the question of which (and how many) institutions and life domains, and thus trajectories, are there at all. The crucial problem remains: to determine, when (and why) a change in the overall direction of a trajectory occurs. Maybe this problem can be solved via the analytical concept of turning point that most life course research has so far used in a rather arbitrary way.

Turning point

The concept of turning point is inextricably linked to the trajectory concept and deserves some theoretical and explanatory comments. First, the label “turning point” is misleading because of its point-like connotation. Whether an event is just a minor variation within a trajectory or momentous enough to change the overall direction of this particular trajectory is logically impossible to assess in the very moment of its occurrence. Only after an adequate stretch of time has passed one can ascertain whether a change in direction has actually taken place. A turning point is, thus, an extended moment of change that stretches from the past into the future and can only be identified retrospectively.

Life course research conceives of turning points objectively as well as subjectively. In the latter perspective they “become a means of bridging continuities and discontinuities in a way that makes sense to the individual” (Clausen 1995, 370): i.e. they are bound to individuals’ biographical reflections. In the strict sense of the subjective conception, turning points are identity-related events which entail some reorientation of priorities and change a person’s inner biographical disposition (Strauss 1959) but need not directly correspond to some external life course change. This is an interesting line of qualitative research in its own right. Yet, in order to develop a coherent set of analytical concepts we need a notion of turning-point that is in line with the structural foundation and conception of trajectories. Therefore, we stick here to an objective conception of turning points irrespective of an individual’s biographical view. To be sure, qualitative biographical research, too, may identify and analyse objective turning points (Denzin 1989; Thomson et al. 2002; Wethington/Kessler/Pixley 2004).

An objective conception of turning points adheres to a substantial change in the direction of a trajectory: “they redirect paths” (Elder 1985, 35). In this understanding, trajectories are structurally defined as social pathways for people’s lives provided by societal structures and institutions. Individuals construct their life courses by “hooking up” multiple trajectories. Due to the inertial quality of trajectories their life courses usually proceed on steady tracks. Occasionally, however, these relatively smooth directional tracks become disturbed or disconnected by “relatively abrupt and diversionary moments” (Abbott 1997, 92). Note that no unusual, and by comparison abrupt, transition constitutes a turning point but, rather, is a turning point only in the case that it initiates some new course pattern.

The relation between trajectories and turning points entails an interesting theoretical aspect of how they are experienced by individuals. Individuals’ life courses may typically be conceived of as sequences of multiple, interdependent trajectories – with a number of transitions along and within each one – that are occasionally linked up by

15 Therefore – just as is the case with defining a state space concerning transitions – it should be left to the researcher to define which (and how many) trajectories are relevant for the question under study.

turning points. This essentially structural view on life courses implies conceptual priority of trajectories over transitions. Yet, from the individual point of view “the ‘regular’ periods of the trajectories are far less consequential and causally important than are the ‘random’ periods of the turning points (...) because they give rise to changes in overall direction or regime, and do so in a determining fashion. (...) In fact they are the crucial sites of determination in the overall structure of a life course” (ibid., 93). Thus, the theoretical aspect concerning the relation between trajectories and turning points implies a methodical one. While some consistent internal causality regime, producing a regular and predictable flow over time, is essential for trajectories and their inertial quality, turning points are characterised by “chaotic” internal regimes – they bear a moment of surprise. Methodically this means that trajectories are causally comprehensible due to their probability regime while turning points are causally incomprehensible.¹⁶

In order to improve our understanding of the underlying dynamics, life course research could benefit from a stronger consideration of biographical perspectives as was envisaged by earlier notions of the life course (Kohli 1986). Unfortunately, the biographical dimension has traditionally been somewhat neglected in life course research. Thus, the “natural rapprochement” of life course analysis and biographical research that would bridge the “abysses between adherents of quantitative and qualitative research” (Mayer 2000, 272) has yet to happen. This would involve several implications such as, for instance, the terminological distinction between “life course” and “biography” – the former referring to institutionally structured life course patterns and the latter relating to individually experienced lives. It takes both “life course” and “biography” to build a comprehensive LIFE COURSE concept.

6. On the temporal structure of trajectories

We conclude our article with some brief remarks on the temporal structure of trajectories, i.e. on the conceptual embedding of transitions. First, for establishing the meaning of the temporal embedding of transitions in trajectories past states must be taken into account as “sequencing is usually ‘memory-endowed’ in the sense that a later state in the sequence remembers information in earlier states, which means that states are not independent” (Hazelrigg 1997, 100). Thus, there is a kind of autobiographical and “historical memory” to transitions in a life course which consists of individuals’ experiences and identities as well as their accumulated resources. The past materialises in products of aging that can be intellectual (knowledge), social (family, networks), and material (property). This “historical memory” is not exclusively bound to the individual whose life course transitions are studied but may also be preserved and put into effect by other individuals and organisations (e.g., family members or work places may be such “memory containers”).

Second, according to Elder the timing of transitions – together with their succession and the durations of states – is of crucial importance for their meaning. The notion of timing rests on the societal validity of age norms. On-time transitions typically

16 “Ironically, trajectories are the periods within which standard statistical modelling might be expected to produce good predictions of outcome, because in a sense that is the definition of a trajectory. But the turning points, precisely because they are the more causally central shifts of regime, will not be discovered by methods aiming at uncovering regimes” (Abbott 1997, 93).

are advantageous, or at least imply no negative consequences, while off-time transitions constitute asynchronicities within and between trajectories and tend to yield disadvantageous consequences.¹⁷ Innovation in life course patterns and societal dynamics, however, may require or result from individuals' creative and non-standard timing.

A third time-related factor important here is sequencing. The notion of sequencing, too, builds on the existence of normatively standardised life course patterns (e.g. getting married before having children). Sequencing refers to a normative, institutionally grounded succession of life events, social status and roles. An "orderly" sequencing is socially appreciated whereas a "disorderly" sequencing may cause trouble. The notion of sequencing entails the same problem of societal relevance as the timing notion: while there are still normatively standardised successions of events and social status, "disorderly" sequences are increasingly becoming common in present-day (post-)industrial societies (Hogan 1978; Marini 1984; Rindfuss/Swicegood/Rosenfeld 1987). Thus, in these societies the prevalence of standard patterns of sequencing (as of timing) is fading away, especially when taking into account longer life course periods.

Fourth, pacing refers to the dynamics of life events and transitions. The number and pace of state changes is not distributed evenly or randomly across trajectories but varies across the life course. Different life phases show different degrees of "density" of events and transitions (Settersten 1999, 138). Usually, "dense" phases of accumulated state changes are more strongly affected by (macro-level) structural conditions than are life phases with a broadly scattered occurrence of events and transitions. Yet, the degree of "density" of status changes may also be due to an individual's (micro-level) coping with current circumstances. Thus, whether the pace of certain life phases is perceived as accelerated depends on both structural conditions and coping activities.

Finally, an important time-related notion is the duration of a state as it may cause some state-dependence. A person remaining in a particular state for a long time probably becomes strongly attached to this state as she acquires state-related knowledge and competencies, builds up state-related networks, and develops a state-related self-image and identity. Thus, the longer the duration of a particular state the less likely is a transition to another one.¹⁸

This paper argues that life course research relates to the interplay of structure and agency over time and that it is, thus, crucial for developing a coherent life course theory to take the sociology of time into account. First, we briefly defined the life course approach and discussed its dimensions and guiding principles. Yet, these em-

17 Yet, so far there is no elaborate theory of age norms (needed for identifying normatively standardised on-times and off-times) which convincingly might form the theoretical backbone for life course research (Settersten 2003). One may doubt such a theory anyway as the degree of societal structuring by age norms has declined in the course of societal modernisation and individualisation.

18 The duration of states is also relevant concerning the future (expected state duration). Individuals make investments of all kinds (for example, in professional skills or social relations) expecting to get some return in the future and a person's investment decision is influenced, *ceteris paribus*, by the duration of the period during which she expects to get these returns. E.g., a person will invest in particular occupational skills only if she expects to practise this occupation long enough for her future investment returns to exceed her current investment costs (just as a company will invest in a worker's qualifications only if they expect their employee not to leave the company before the amortisation of their investment costs).

pirically informed principles – often mistaken for life course theory – are unsuitable to inform such theory development. Therefore we examined the three analytical concepts that are at the heart of life course sociology: transition, trajectory and turning point and their time-sociological implications. We suggest that this is a promising starting point for life course theorising. In order to indicate the direct links to the sociology of time we concluded with a preliminary examination of some temporal aspects of the structure of trajectories. One starting point for further theoretical elaboration of the time-sociological implications of the life course approach could be G. H. Mead's (2002/1932; Flaherty/Fine 2001) emphasis on "events" as key aspects of time structuring. Life course theorising could be extended to a conceptual analysis of the very notion of an event – a widespread concept in empirical life course research and methodology which, so far, is lacking a thorough theoretical and time-sociological conceptualisation.

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